

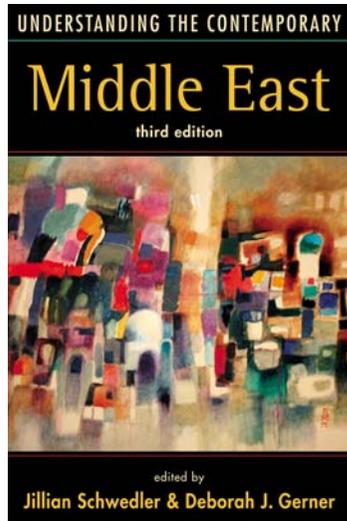
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# Understanding the Contemporary Middle East

THIRD EDITION

edited by  
Jillian Schwedler  
and Deborah J. Gerner

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# 1

## Introduction

*Jillian Schwedler*

It is an unfortunate truism that tragedy, violence, and bloodshed attract more attention than do the routine patterns and daily rhythms of peaceful human life. The classic mantra of journalism—“if it bleeds, it leads”—has meant that the Middle East remains prominent in print and broadcast media alike, and that images of bloodshed dominate the Western imagination of the region. Yet the reasons why the Middle East appears fraught with violence are not widely understood. Extraordinary events such as the attacks of September 11, 2001, by extremist Islamists reinforce these stereotypes and exacerbate existing notions of Middle East exceptionalism—the idea that there is just something *different* about the region that renders useless more conventional and familiar models of history, politics, and culture. But such events have a positive side: they inspire individuals who had little prior interest to invest their time and energy in gaining a better understanding of the Middle East. Regional specialists continue to be flooded with invitations to speak to classes, churches, community groups, and other local organizations since the September 11 attacks, and most such invitations come with an honest desire to learn about topics ranging from the Arab-Israeli conflict to political extremism to the basic tenets of Islam. Indeed, the ubiquity of rapidly written books on topics such as Islam and countries such as Saudi Arabia available near the cash registers at bookstores frustrate scholars, who know that these “quick-and-dirty” primers are full of factual errors and lazy stereotypes; however, the overall desire of ordinary citizens to learn more about the region rather than rely on conventional wisdom remains heartening. In colleges and universities, courses on topics such as “terrorism,” “political Islam,” “women in the Middle East,” and “Middle East politics”—not to mention Arabic language classes—are choked with

oversubscription and long waiting lists. Sometimes, these courses are taught by specialists with years of language training and deep historical knowledge of and experience in the region; at other times, the instructors themselves are struggling to get up to speed on topics that are relatively new to them. In response to the many questions by students and colleagues, regional specialists have had to bone up on themes and locales that were peripheral to their research and teaching interests—for example, to answer questions about the Taliban. In all cases, however, the expanding thirst for knowledge of the history, cultures, politics, and people of the Middle East has been a welcome development. Major Western countries, most obviously the United States, are intimately engaged in the politics and economics of the region, for reasons ranging from their dependence on petroleum resources to religious affinities to the desire to reconstruct Middle Eastern states in a liberal democratic image. These diverse forms of intervention, engagement, and cooperation are not going to end any time soon, so it behooves the peoples of many nations to expand their understanding of this region.

This book provides a broad but detailed overview of the geography, politics, history, cultures, economies, and peoples of the Middle East. Written by area specialists from diverse disciplines, it addresses head-on the myths and realities of conventional wisdom about the region, aiming to unpack complex processes without romanticizing the region's cultures or downplaying the very real political violence with which many peoples of the Middle East must live and cope daily.

The term *Middle East* is broadly used to refer to those countries that are members of the League of Arab States, plus Israel (with its Jewish and Arab population), and the non-Arab countries of Turkey and Iran (both of which also have small Arab populations). These countries are clustered into three subregions. North Africa includes the countries of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as the sub-Saharan states of the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, and Sudan. The area along the eastern end of the Mediterranean is the Fertile Crescent (also called the Levant, a namesake relic of the colonial period) and includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as non-Arab Turkey to the north. Finally, the oil-producing countries of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula include Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and the non-Arab, Persian state of Iran.

As Ian R. Manners and Barbara McKean Parmenter illustrate, the term *Middle East* is itself a European construct, one that largely replaced the earlier term *Near East*. Today, *Middle East* is favored over *Near East*, though both reflect spatial perspectives firmly anchored in a Eurocentric world: the Near East was east of Europe but closer in proximity than the Far East lands we today call East Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The term *orient* means simply “east,” in opposition to the “west,” or *occident*. The term *orientalism*

is now most widely used to critique lingering stereotypes of “eastern” and, primarily, Arab cultures as exotic, backward, and premodern. In the nineteenth century, however, departments of Oriental studies emerged as a discipline in European academies for the study of the languages and cultures of the Near and Middle East. Today most academic departments dedicated to the study of the region are named Near or Middle Eastern studies, though a few (mostly British) universities continue to employ the term *oriental* for their programs. (Cambridge University is the latest to rename its Department of Oriental Studies, in 2007.)

These debates raise serious questions about the logic of continuing to cluster countries as diverse historically and culturally as, for example, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Somalia, Yemen, and Tunisia, under the single category *Middle East*. It might make more sense to cluster studies around the bodies of water that facilitated historical interactions, such as Mediterranean countries (so that France, Italy, and Greece would be included in a category alongside Morocco, Algeria, and Lebanon, among others) or the Red Sea (Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen). Similarly, non-Arab Iran is mostly connected to the Middle East as a result of its Islamic heritage, but it just as easily might be included in a cluster with Central Asian states, or form the core of a cluster surrounding it (Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan). Yemen has strong historical ties not only to the Arabian Peninsula but also to Malaysia as a result of centuries-old trade routes. Indeed, these connections remain salient today and are visible, for example, in the many signs in the Malay language visible in Yemen’s southern coastal cities.

Yet the category of *Middle East* does make considerable sense given the shared historical experiences of the spread of Islam, the reach of the Ottoman Empire, and the experiences of European colonialism. The Arab world shares linguistic as well as cultural similarities, although a Syrian, a Moroccan, and an Omani, for example, could easily find more that is different than alike in terms of their actual life experiences. The Islamic world, similarly, has limitations as a category, even though Muslims globally identify themselves as part of a broader Muslim community, or *umma*. But Muslims—the followers of the Islamic faith—make up a fifth of the global population with some 1.5 billion followers and growing at a pace of 2 percent annually. Of that number, only some 250 million—less than a fifth of the total—live in the Arab world. The point is not to settle on a better or more accurate category—favoring Middle East over Islamic world or Arab world—but to recognize the myriad ways in which the region coheres as a whole around some issues, less so around others.

One common assumption is that Western nations had limited interest in the Middle East until the colonial period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later discovery of oil. In this erroneous view, the Middle

East was largely isolated from the “outside world” prior to the spread of European colonialism, which is why it appears to remain largely traditional and to resist engagement with “the modern world.” As Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. illustrates in Chapter 3, however, the peoples of the Middle East in fact have been in contact with Western peoples—indeed, with those in all geographic directions—for centuries. Ancient trade patterns persisted and changed with advents of transportation, while pilgrims from all over the globe have for centuries trekked to visit the region’s many holy sites.

Intellectually, the major works of Greek philosophy were lost to Europe for centuries but survived in the Arab-Islamic world; they were only reintroduced to the West by Arab scholars. During Europe’s dark Middle Ages, Muslim as well as Jewish scholars in the Middle East were substantially more advanced in many fields, including science, medicine, mathematics, architecture, literature, the visual arts, and education. The decimal number system in wide use today was developed by Arabs who later taught it to Europeans, introducing them to the concept of *zero* in the process. In terms of ordinary language, English words such as *alcohol* and *algebra* come from the Arabic.

As Deborah J. Gerner noted in the introduction to the second edition of *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, Middle Eastern cultural influences in the West extend well beyond science, religion, and mathematics. Since the early twentieth century, numerous Middle Eastern poets and philosophers gained sizable followings. Edward FitzGerald’s nineteenth-century English translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* enthralled Western readers, just as the “flower children” and peace activists of the 1960s embraced the works of Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran. In the 1990s, the poetry of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, the eleventh-century Persian mystic, found its way onto best-seller lists in the United States. The Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988, bringing the radical social critique of his writings, particularly *The Cairo Trilogy*, into millions of households (Gerner, 2004:3). The audience of Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk has grown exponentially since he won the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2003 and the 2004 translation of his novel *Snow* was named a *New York Times* Best Book of the Year; in 2006, he became the Middle East’s third Nobel laureate in literature. As miriam cooke shows in Chapter 13, novels, short stories, and poetry from the region are being translated at increasing rates, introducing ever wider audiences to the diverse experiences and interventions of Middle Eastern voices.

## ■ Organization of the Book

The chapters in this book explore the key themes and controversies of the Middle East in the fields of geography, history, politics, international relations,

economics, sociology, demography, anthropology, gender studies, conflict resolution, religion, and literature. Each chapter stands on its own, but the authors also engage directly in the debates in the other chapters, particularly when another chapter provides an expanded discussion of a given topic. In Chapter 2, Ian R. Manners and Barbara McKean Parmenter ask a critical starting question, “What is the Middle East?” Rather than considering the region as a single, geographical entity, they argue, we should think about its multiple and shifting boundaries. Besides political boundaries, the geography of the region has been shaped (and continues to be shaped) by foreign interventions, cultural change, language, urbanization, the flow of migrant workers and refugees, and the rapid decline in water resources. In Chapter 3, Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. examines the history of the region (and its shifting geographies), from the ancient empires of Egypt and Sumer more than 5,000 years ago to the Middle East we know today. He elaborates on a central theme of the book, namely, that the Middle East has never been a closed or isolated unit—politically, economically, or culturally.

In Chapter 4, Deborah J. Gerner and Philip A. Schrodt focus on the domestic politics of Middle Eastern countries, emphasizing the ongoing effects of the colonial legacy as well as contemporary forms of political organization and the various ideologies that offer competing visions of political reform. While the chapter focuses on comparisons within the region, it draws explicit connections to global political trends. In Chapter 5, Mary Ann Tétreault develops these questions concerning international intervention, regional alliances, and various regional subsystems. From the colonial period to the Cold War to the war in Iraq, the politics of the Middle East has been intimately connected—in mostly negative ways—with the political agendas and ambitions of the Great Powers.

Chapter 6, by Simona Sharoni and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, is unique to this volume in providing a detailed analysis of a single conflict; it is also unusual in being coauthored by an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Their careful and nuanced discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict examines the history of the conflict through the lens of conflict resolution. This forward-looking perspective rejects the idea that the conflict is intractable and cannot be solved, adopting instead a framework for thinking about what a just resolution might entail.

In Chapter 7, Agnieszka Paczynska examines the economies of the Middle East, with particular attention to contemporary challenges. She builds on the themes introduced in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, examining structural adjustment, trade patterns, and economic trends in light of regional politics and the long history of foreign involvement in the region. In Chapter 8, Mary Ann Tétreault elaborates on the seminal question of oil and the profound ways in which its discovery in the early twentieth century ensured the continued and deep involvement of foreign governments even with the formal end of the colonial period. The first multinational corporations were oil companies,

and their heavy-handed efforts to ensure their interests had profound effects on the shape of domestic politics in the region.

In Chapter 9, Valentine M. Moghadam explores the ways in which these economic processes affected the region's populations. She emphasizes the connections between population growth, urbanization, labor and immigration, (un)employment, poverty, and income inequality, with particular attention to the striking differences that emerge between countries of the region as well as between men and women. In Chapter 10, Laurie King-Irani explores the ways in which kinship networks, class, and ethnicity affect the daily social realities of the peoples of the region. She provides insights into the gender and family relationships that are often a source of confusion to outsiders, stressing the ways in which many aspects of kinship, class, and ethnicity are highly adaptive in their Middle Eastern contexts. Chapter 11 further develops questions of gender, as Lisa Taraki examines the effects of norms and values on women's roles, and the ways in which those are changing in the context of the region's modern nation-states. She emphasizes the diversity of experiences among women in the region, with particular attention to their changing political role.

In Chapter 12, I examine the historical role of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East, and the ways in which religion and politics have been interconnected historically. I then discuss the role of religion in the contemporary politics of the region, from the emergence of religious extremism, to the many and varied ways in which moderate religious activists engage peacefully in the pluralist political processes of the region's (mostly) authoritarian regimes.

In Chapter 13, miriam cooke describes beautifully the historical and cultural underpinnings of Middle Eastern literature: poetry, short stories, novels, and plays. Literature, she shows us, does not exist in a vacuum but instead reflects as well as influences its environment—the cultural ferment, the impact of colonization and struggles for independence, the experience of exile and emigration—in profound ways. As the richness of Middle Eastern literature remains unknown to most Westerners, this chapter also provides an introduction to the large and growing body of material available in English translation.

Finally, Chapter 14 outlines the challenges facing the region in the twenty-first century, as the global war on terror and the ongoing Iraq conflict color the domestic issues facing the peoples and governments of the region. Most notably, not a single state in the region is without indigenous movements demanding greater participation and accountability from their governments.

These chapters are likely to challenge some of your existing perceptions about the Middle East while confirming and fleshing out others. Like any region of the world, "reality" is a complicated notation that cannot be

fully understood outside of local perspectives. While it is nonsensical to talk about a single “Middle Eastern culture,” the historical experiences and daily practices of the various peoples of the region do share significant similarities in many areas (though not in others). The politics of the region dominate most of the West’s common knowledge, and these chapters aim to make accessible a rich understanding of these complexities. At the same time, a primary goal of this book is to bring to life the lived experiences of Middle Eastern peoples, and many of these will feel surprisingly familiar to you. We hope you enjoy your exploration of the contemporary Middle East.

### ■ Bibliography

Gerner, Deborah J. 2004. “Introduction.” Pp. 1–4 in Deborah J. Gerner and Jillian Schwedler (eds.), *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*. 2nd ed. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

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